AAHS Distinguished Alumni Award
October 5, 2002
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I am more grateful than I can say for this Distinguished Alumni Award. I want to thank those who recommended and nominated me for this award.

My brother-in-law Bill Kearney — who used to eye me warily when I was pursuing his baby sister — 1953 graduate — Charlene, his wife — my class of 55. Bill was a teacher, guidance counselor, principal.

Bob Reffner — class of 1957 — best friend since Fair_____ grade school — wife Linda, 1958 — life long friends.

Bob Julubi — high school buddy — basketball rival in the YMCA league — politics _____ (I'm one of very few — maybe the only one who ever won an election in which he ran) good friend.

Eleanor Stickmer — English teacher at Keith Jobby — probably the first teacher ever to get through and show me that the process of education is not just about grades but learning about life.

My _____ Bro-in-law Bb Kearney – class of _____ and Joyce — class

Others

And I accept it with humility. _____ is a big public high school, busily cranking out 6-700 graduates per year (get figure). That's more than 30,000 of us since I marched into the Jaffa Mosque on a June morning in 1955 and emerged into the bright Pennsylvania sunshine, with a high school diploma. And I've been thinking, ever since I received that wonderful letter from Tom Bradley about the amazing people who have come from this community, this High School, and all they have given to the world.
Specifically — present company.

What an honor to be in the same company as Harry Colman, Dave Ferguson, who I knew in High School and labored with on Paul Adam's track team, and Thomas Johnson and Paul Winter. I've stayed in touch with Paul over the years and watched in amazement as he contributed so much to the culture — as a very creative musician, but also as a ambassador for peace and international understanding, and a spokesperson for the earth, its fragile environment. Paul and I attended the same church, Broad Avenue Presbyterian, and so did Admiral James Lay — a Distinguished Alumni in 2000.

I’m grateful to be in this company. And I’ve been thinking of those who have spent their lives giving back to the nation and the world: classmates of mine who died serving in the military. Dick Curry — state champion miler 4:29 — back when that time raised eyebrows, Harry Grebe both good friends. Terry Ward, along with Bob Reffner — best buddy, who spent his entire career working in the Intelligence community, quietly, out of the spotlight, in some of the most critical and dangerous posts in the world.

And I think of two relatives who over the years have been my mentors — graduates of Altoona High School, John Calvin McCormick, class of 1940, Marine,

who died in Saipan in 1944, for whom I am named. My favorite picture of Jack is in a Altoona High School cheerleading sweater, with his megaphone, at Mansion Park, in the fall of 1939. And Frank Buchanan, Army Air Corps, shot down over Italy, captured, imprisioned, escaped, and returned to Altoona — a decorated war hero — and I still recall — visited his High School teachers.

What is it about this place — that instead of a sense of entitlement, sending us out into the world full of our own importance; instead planted in us a sense of vocation to give back, to be a contributor, a participant, to pick up the tools and do the work for the common good?

Was it the work ethic which brought our grandparents and parents to Altoona to work for the railroad: hard, back breaking, noisy, dirty, dangerous work?

Was it their courage that enabled them to stay through economic uncertainty, labor strife and the inevitable seasonal layoffs?

Was it the fact that many of them were one generation away from a difficult less-than-hopeful life in Italy, Sicily, Ireland, Poland, Germany, Rumania, Russia — and therefore determined to do their best and that their children who

do better than they had; would do all they were capable of doing.

I think it is all of the above — and maybe even a sense that the city itself was here for a purpose: railroad hub — absolutely vital link in the national transportation system, moving the nation's goods and people — (What a railroad station we used to have!) building the engines, repairing the equipment, sorting out the freight. How proud we were growing up to tell ourselves that Altoona — was so important that it was at the top of the German's potential bombing targets. Take out us — our shops and freight yards — and all would be lost.

In any event, I'm deeply grateful this evening for all for that: for the beauty of this place. I'm not sure those who live here realize how spectacularly beautiful it is. Sue and I always watch Penn State football games — not only for the game — but to catch a precious glimpse of the mountains in the fall. 47 years later and we are still not quite at home in our home — the incredible, but altogether flat city of Chicago.

And I'm grateful for Altoona High School. Author John Updike wrote somewhere nostalgically about the way the blue collar cities of the East used to invest a lot of civic pride and hope and resources in the local high school. It was often the biggest, most dramatic

building in town. Those old High School buildings gathered up the aspirations of the hard working committees. They had grand entrances, sweeping stairways from the street level to the first floor, a dome — like the Capitol, like a cathedral. The building itself said "Important things happen here." No criticism is intended of the AAHS building — but I'm grateful for the gift of going to school in that old one.

And I'm grateful for the people who taught us: who got up every morning and went to work to face class rooms of unruly adolescents who didn't particularly want to be there — whose romantic and erotic and social athletic and extra curricular impulses were

enormous: students who were convinced that the best things they could do is make life miserable for them. What made them do that — for so little money?

They cared, I'm convinced. They care deeply, I now know for the common good of the community and nation, and they cared about us. They would never have said it, but I now know what I certainly didn't know at the time, and that is that they loved us. And the best of them loved us, not by telling us how wonderful we were, but by expecting, demanding much — reminding us sometimes strenuously — vigorously — that we weren't so hot, that we had a

long way to go — that we really didn't know very much at all — yet.

I learned most from and am most grateful for teachers who were demanding, who expected much and let me know when I was not measuring up.

Each of us has a list of them, mine includes.

Una Small — who taught Latin — and who forever defined the word formidable. A one-on-one conversation with Miss Small was a terrifying experience. She was absolutely a no nonsense teacher. She didn't think athleticism, music, had anything whatever to do with education and she

let us know it — those of us who were so busy doing things other than studying Latin. She rarely smiled. She was so no nonsense that her name and picture are not even in the yearbook. I went looking for her and was disappointed not to find her. I know I didn't imagine her. She is frowning right now — every time we pronounce alumni — it's alumni (ee) — stupid. The "I" in Latin is pronounced "e." So she cared so much about Latin that she didn't even have her picture taken. And she did smile, once, slightly, when I told her I had received a college scholarship.

William Hoffman — Chemistry, a task master.

William Yoder — whose laboratory rat bit my thumb and sent me to my first trip to the Altoona Hospital emergency room — on the day of the fist baseball game of the season and I couldn't get the glove on my hand.

William Whittaker who opened up the world of literature and writing to me — with "Giants in the Earth."

Paul Adams, track and cross country. I was on the 1954 team that won the State championship (shared it w/Williamsport) in the snow on the PSU golf course. Everybody called him "Punchy" — and it was rumored that he loathed the name so profoundly that the

lat person to say it within earshot — promptly disappeared from the team, school, city, and this life for all we know. Mr. Adams was stern, humorless, absolutely demanding. He never attended a seminary on respecting student's feelings. When you weren't running enough —which meant throwing up and nearly dying at the finish line, he would say something like — "no guts, Buchanan: I can still see a yellow streak on your back: you have more to give." I never met anybody like him. But we did win the State Championship and when I was ordained as a Presbyterian Minister, he and his wife came to the service and I saw him smile.

John Monti — perhaps most remarkable of them all. Superb musician, first generation immigrant. His father came from Sicily. Monti worked hard. Played football — with my father and future father-in-law. He simply expected people to produce great music and to act like great people. His bands and orchestras were, in fact, very good. We played serious music. He built and maintained a feeder system in he Jr. Highs and elementary schools that produced accomplished musicians by the time of High School. He was demanding, often funny, sometimes petulant. He slammed down the baton and simply walked out of the rehearsal on more than one occasion. And he cared so deeply, not only about musical quality, but about me as person, that many —

many of us — used him as a counselor and advisor. And continued to stay in touch until he died five years ago.

I'm grateful to this community and the school. Best of all — it was where I first met Sue Kearney — in Keith Jr. High — if truth were told — and we dated and courted on and off, for the three years of High School in a way that my own children cannot comprehend, we share a life of growing and becoming — in an amazing way. And we married just as soon as we could. And without anything coming in a close second — that has been the most precious gift in my life.

So thank you — Altoona — Altoona High Schools — AAHS — Alumni Association

And yes, I do know that “On Wisconsin” — is really “On Altoona.”

And “Far Above Cayuga’s Waters” is really a cheap imitation of the real thing.

Blow O Gentle Mountain Breezes

From the golden west.

Dear old AHS